

THAI CULTURE.*

by

H. R. H. PRINCE WAN WAITHAYAKON.

I should like, first of all, sincerely to thank the members of the Society for the high honour they have bestowed upon me in electing me to the responsible position of President. H. H. the former President very kindly suggested that I should, on this occasion, give a lecture in the nature of an inaugural address. It so happens that the National Institute of Culture has asked this Society as well as other associations to cooperate in the promotion of culture in this country; and I have been designated by your Council to speak on the subject. As a preliminary remark, I should like to make it clear that although I am a member of the Council of the National Institute of Culture, I am not now speaking in that capacity; and the views I am going to express are entirely my own personal views.

Culture is a word which is very much in vogue nowadays. Take up a daily newspaper, whether in the vernacular or in a foreign language, and you will find something about culture. I pick up a number of the *Bangkok Chronicle* at random and, in its issue of February 19, find Sven Hedin speaking about "the Continent which is the home and citadel of Western Culture". The third principle in the Joint Declaration of the Assembly of Greater East-Asiatic Nations reads as follows: "3. The countries of Greater East Asia by respecting one another's traditions and developing the creative faculties of each race, will enhance the culture and civilisation of Greater East Asia".

But what exactly is culture? And what is civilisation? In addition to the Pact of Alliance covering political, military and economic fields of collaboration between Thailand and Japan, a Cultural Agreement between

*Lecture delivered before the Thailand Research Society on Sunday 27th February B. E. 2487 (1944).

the two countries was concluded on October 28, 1942. This certainly attests to the importance of cultural co-operation, but no definition of culture is given; and if the various provisions are examined, the term "culture" in that Agreement would appear to refer to activities in education, intellectual, spiritual and physical, in fine arts and in publicity, the underlying idea being to promote still closer mutual understanding between the two nations. Culture here may be said to be a complement of politics and economics.

Now let us cast a glance over what has been done in Thailand, in the field of culture, in recent years. I shall start by giving you the facts. In so doing, I shall deal with only those activities which come within the scope of the National Institute of Culture, leaving aside other cultural activities, such as the Youth Movement and other social service activities, which can be easily understood to come under State action and control.

Ever since his assumption of office as Premier, Field-Marshal P. Phibun-Songkram has attached the greatest importance to the development of culture among the Thai people. He started by making appeals to the public through broadcasting and through the press. His desire is to inspire and instil into the people the spirit of action, which is characteristically his, namely, the spirit of united patriotic action looking to the greatness and prosperity of Thailand.

He soon felt the need, however, of a more systematic and concerted action with a view to securing more effective and uniform results. In his broadcast address to the nation on the National Day of June 24, 1939, he said that education and patriotism alone were not complete qualities in themselves: they had to be complemented by national traditions, which the Government would notify to the public from time to time, under the name of *Rathaniyom*, for their own observance as well as for the observance of generations to come. *Rathaniyom* has been literally but unmeaningly translated as State conventions. A free translation would be "unwritten law of the State", but my own rendering would be State custom and convention, adapting the phrase from the custom and convention of the unwritten constitution of Great Britain.

His Excellency went on to explain that State custom and convention is similar to the moral code of etiquette of civilised people, with a further special sanction of the force of public action derived from public opinion.

Actions sanctioned by public approval create a force of public opinion, which can compel observance by a recalcitrant minority who now escape the arm of the law. The public may, for instance, give a stern warning to a person violating the State custom and convention or they may withhold him from such violation or make him over to the authorities.

The State custom and convention has been promulgated in the form of notification by the Presidency of the Council. Twelve such notifications have been issued, as follows :

1. June 24, 1939, concerning the designation of the country, people and nationality, namely, Thailand and Thai.
2. July 3, 1939, concerning the prevention of possible danger to the nation, enjoining upon the Thai people not to lose sight of national safety and national interests, not to reveal secrets detrimental to the nation, not to act on behalf of foreigners without considering the national interests of Thailand and not clandestinely to sell or purchase land on behalf of foreigners so as to be a danger to the nation.
3. August 2, 1939, concerning the designation of Thai persons, all of whom are to be known as Thai.
4. September 8, 1939, concerning respect to be shown to the national flag, the National Song and the Royal Anthem.
5. November 1, 1939, enjoining upon Thai people to endeavour to use commodities produced or made in Thailand.
6. December 10, 1939, concerning the new wording of the National Song.
7. March 21, 1940, appealing to the Thai people to join in the national reconstruction by each having a definite occupation.
8. April 26, 1940, concerning the new wording of the Royal Anthem.
9. June 24, 1940, concerning the upholding of the Thai language as the duty of a good citizen.
10. January 15, 1941, enjoining upon Thai people to dress suitably.
11. September 8, 1941, concerning the daily life of the Thai people, who are to distribute their time properly for their occupation, their personal affairs and their recreation and repose.
12. January 28, 1942, concerning the extending of a helping hand to the young, aged and infirm in public places and highways.

In these Notifications of the State custom and convention no legal sanction has been provided for.

In promulgating the first two Notifications, the following official explanation was given :

"The duties of the Government, however multifarious and comprehensive they may be, may be summed up in the duty of building up the stability and development of the nation.

"Stability is most important and must be provided for first, but development cannot be neglected.

"Ever since Thailand entered into the new regime, the Government have successfully endeavoured to build up stability in many ways, such as by revising the treaties which resulted in the recovery of political, judicial and economic autonomy, by building up stronger national defence forces, by strengthening security in matters of finance, agriculture, the safeguarding of public tranquillity and public health and by many other activities which are factors of stability.

"For the permanent efficacy of the work already done and still to be done, the Thai people must cultivate in themselves qualities into line with the new regime. The Government must therefore devote their attention to building up development side by side with the stability which they have endeavoured to bring about.

"But the building up of stability is not the same with that of development. The former can rely on law as a means of enforcement, but for the latter it is not convenient to adopt law as the means. The Government have therefore set up rules of action called *Rathaniyom*.

"*Rathaniyom* has similar characteristics to those of *Phrarachaniyom* (Royal custom and convention) in former times; the only difference is that *Phrarachaniyom* constituted the opinion of the king alone, while *Rathaniyom* constitutes the opinion of the State formed in conformity with public opinion as a national tradition.

"The Thai people who hope for the stable development of the nation should of one accord respect and observe the *Rathaniyom* promulgated by the Government in the Government Gazette."

Moral codes of conduct apart from the rules of conduct laid down by law are, in the West, built up through the initiative of the groups of persons concerned. But if you look back into history, you will find that they were set up through the initiative of the high priest, the elders, the

king, the great religious teachers or, in other words, by the leaders in the communities concerned. Thailand passed from patriarchal kingship to absolute monarchy without passing through feudalism; and as it has been essentially an agricultural country, urban life has been confined mainly to the capital. Thus codes of etiquette have emanated mainly from the Court. Now with the advent of the constitutional regime the Government naturally have to take the lead formerly taken by the king himself.

King Ramkhamhæng, who was the father of his people, not only caused religious preaching to be undertaken by the monks, not only dealt with affairs of State in full assembly, but himself taught the people in moral rules of conduct: "Phokhun Phra Ramkhamhæng is the lord and chief of all the Thai and is the preceptor teaching all the Thai to know truly what is meritorious and what is righteous." It is so recorded in the inscriptions of Sukhothai.

There are many curious notifications of King Mongkut laying down rules for observance in miscellaneous matters which normally, in the West, would not be the subject of legislation. I take examples at random. There is one prohibiting the use, in petitions and letters to the king, of pen and ink or pencil, the writing with which is faint and pale and not truly black. Coloured European pencils, whether blue or red, and blue or red ink may be used; and Thai black pencils may be used on Thai paper, as heretofore. There is no sanction provided for, but it is stated that non-compliance will be displeasing to His Majesty, while compliance will bring about every facility and convenience in securing the realisation of the petitioner's wishes. There is another one enumerating many excellent kinds of Thai musical entertainments, such as Lakhon theatrical performance, Ponram dancing, Piphat instrumental music, Mahori orchestra, half-portion Sepha ballads, Sakawa repartee songs, Probkai songs marked by hand-clapping, Thai harvest and other songs. Why then should the khæn bagpipe be so much in vogue as to oust the traditional kinds of Thai music just enumerated. It is therefore a matter of concern to His Majesty who is graciously pleased to implore all those concerned to give up the khæn bagpipe for a year or two as a try. If the khæn bagpipe entertainment is still persisted in, a heavy tax will be imposed upon those responsible for the entertainment; and if such entertainment takes place in secret a twofold or threefold tax will be imposed as a fine. There is a long notification pointing out that, according to ancient custom, gold is either kept in safe-keeping or is the object of commercial transactions or,

if it is used as an ornament, it is so used for adults only and not for children, because children are not in a position to protect themselves or their gold ornaments from thieves. Gold ornaments are a bait to thieves. Children are therefore forbidden to wear gold ornaments weighing one and one-eighth Baht upwards. Persons making children wear gold ornaments in violation of the notification will be fined and the amount of the fine will be spent in buying sand for the highways. I shall just quote one more: it is a notification to the effect that Wat Rachapradit should be called by its proper name and not be called Wat Rachabandit. Offenders shall be fined two Tamlung or eight Baht for each offence.

From what has been said it will be seen that the procedure adopted by the Government in building up social customs and conventions has been that of appeal to the public in the first instance and then that of *Rathaniyom* notifications without legal sanction. Legal sanctions, however, are known to have been provided for in some of the notifications of the Fourth Reign; and indeed the need was soon felt by the present Government for some legal sanction. On October 15, 1940, therefore, the National Cultural Development Act B. E. 2483 was promulgated. It is stated in the preamble that it is expedient to set up legal provisions for the development of national culture as a factor in fostering and promoting national progress. Culture is defined in that Act as characteristics showing flourishing development, good order, harmonious progress of the nation and public good morals. It is the duty of Thai people to comply with the national culture and to foster and promote the national progress by preserving what is good in the traditional culture and co-operating in improving such culture in consonance with the times. Royal Decrees shall be promulgated in the following matters: 1. orderliness in dress, manners and etiquette in public places or in places visible to the public, 2. efficiency and etiquette in occupational pursuits and 3. appreciation of things Thai. Account is to be taken of local conditions and living conditions of persons in the various localities. A fine not exceeding twelve Baht is stipulated as the penalty; and the proceeds of the fine shall be devoted to local improvement.

This Act has been replaced by the National Culture Act B. E. 2485 and the National Culture Act (No. 2) B. E. 2486. The matters to be regulated by Royal Decrees are now 1. orderliness in dress, behaviour and etiquette in public places or in places visible to the public, 2. orderliness in personal care and care of the home, 3. orderliness in personal

behaviour looking to the honour of the nation and the Buddhist religion, 4. efficiency and etiquette in occupational pursuits, 5. spiritual and moral development of the people, 6. progress in literary and artistic works, and 7. appreciation of things Thai. The National Institute of Culture has been set up, with the status of a public body under the Presidency of the Council. Its duties are 1. to research into, adapt, preserve and promote the existing national culture, 2. to research into, adapt and determine the culture which should be adopted or further re-adjusted, 3. to diffuse the national culture in conformity with the times, 4. to control and find means of instilling the national culture into the spirit of the people, and 5. to give opinion upon consultation or otherwise and to take action as desired by the Government in matters concerning the national culture. The Institute is divided into five bureaux: 1. Bureau of Spiritual Culture, 2. Bureau of Customary Culture, 3. Bureau of Artistic Culture, 4. Bureau of Literary Culture, and 5. Bureau of Women's Culture. The Institute has control over associations and organisations with cultural objects. The penalty for violations of Royal Decrees has been raised to a fine not exceeding one hundred Baht or imprisonment not exceeding one month or both.

Royal Decrees have been issued regarding orderly conduct in public places or in places visible to the public, care of the home, upholding of the national honour, respect to be shown to the national flag, conduct in carrying out one's occupation and other matters.

A perusal of the various Royal Decrees, notifications and appeals reveals a great number of details in what might appear to be small or insignificant matters; and it is not easy to have a clear picture of the trend of cultural development now taking place. One explanation is that such development is still in its initial stages and those matters are regulated first, in which the need for regulation becomes apparent to the competent authorities concerned. Another explanation is that the domain of culture is so wide and comprehensive. Professor Wissler's universal culture pattern is as follows: 1. Speech—Languages, writing systems, etc. 2. Material traits—a. Food habits, b. Shelter, c. Transportation and travel, d. Dress, e. Utensils, tools, etc., f. Weapons, g. Occupations and industries. 3. Art—Carving, painting, drawing, music, etc. 4. Mythology and Scientific Knowledge. 5. Religious practices—a. Ritualistic forms, b. Treatment of the sick, c. Treatment of the dead. 6. Family and social system—a. The forms of marriage, b. Methods

of reckoning kinship, c. Inheritance, d. Social control, e. Sports and games. 7. Property—a. Real and personal, b. Standards of value and exchange; c. Trade. 8. Government—a. Political forms, b. Judicial and legal procedures. 9. War.

Nor has culture in the narrow sense of arts and letters been neglected. An University of Fine Arts has been set up; and a literary revival has been set in motion. Orthography has been simplified by the elimination of 13 consonants and 5 vowels, which are not necessary for Thai spelling, while the remaining alphabet is sufficient for indicating Pali-Sanskrit derivations. A monthly Literary Review has been published; and as Editor I can say that it has met with a keen and wide interest.

Enough has been said on what is being done in the development of culture in Thailand. But what about Thai culture? I am aware that questions have been asked why Thai men should wear trousers. The answer, in my opinion, is that the function of culture is twofold: it is calculated to bring about, among the people, a mode of life, which can meet the requirements of the times, while at the same time upholding the spirit of the nation. It is a fact that modern civilisation in the form of the Industrial System has pervaded the world. Each nation, in order to achieve progress or even merely to survive, must so organize the life of its people as to be able to make an adequate response to the challenge thus put forward by the prevailing world economic system. Some years ago, I asked a Japanese friend of mine why Japanese men had taken to trousers. He replied that he put on trousers in order to go to the office, because he felt more business-like than if he wore the kimono, which he preferred to wear at home. I have been struck by his remark; and, from the psychological point of view, I think there is a great deal to be said for it. An English journalist once said that the Thai played at work and worked at play. In order to meet the requirements of the times, we must work at work and play at play.

But has Thai culture a particular stamp of its own? The National Institute of Culture has issued a national code of valour called National *Wiratham*, a literal translation of which would be the epic ethics of the nation, or, in other words, the heroic virtues of the nation. *Wira* means a strong man, a man of courage, a warrior, a man with fortitude or enduring effort; and *Tham* means righteousness, or, in other words, the right way of life. The best rendering into English that I can think of at present is "Code of Valour".